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How serious is the risk of de-skilling of Ukrainian war refugees (and what we can do about it)

Research at CMR has demonstrated that while the labour market incorporation of Ukrainians in Poland has been spectacular, skill-matching and finding a job corresponding to the competencies and aspirations of war refugees remains a serious challenge (pages 2-4). To counter the risk of a negative impact of the war on the careers and well-being of Ukrainians in Poland, the CMR has organised “Skills for the Future” – a support program for people with a background in social, economic or related fields, organised as part of the “UW for Ukraine” initiative. It included courses, a summer school, and mentoring activities. The Polish-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce also offered its support. In this issue, the organisers and participants share their experiences (pages 4-9).



Participants of „Skills for the Future” joined the IMISCOE Annual Conference, the largest migration research conference in Europe, organised by CMR at the University of Warsaw in July 2023.



Matching the skills of Ukrainian war refugees to the Polish labour market

Paweł Kaczmarczyk

The full-scale, unprovoked and unjustified war launched by Russia on 24 February 2022 triggered one of the largest migration waves in modern European history. The available data indicate that it is a phenomenon of comparable magnitude to the population movements observed just after the end of the Second World War. In fact, even if we focus only on the experience of Poland as one of the main countries for the arrival of refugees from Ukraine, it is clear that the scale of this latest migration flow exceeds the scale of the processes that have been described as the refugee/migration crisis that Europe experienced between 2014 and 2016. In the first two months alone, some 3.5 million people have crossed the border into Poland, the vast majority of them of Ukrainian nationality. The UNHCR estimates that more than 5.8 million people have registered inside EU countries. The global figure was over 6.2 million (as of September 2023).

The special law (Law on assistance to Ukrainian citizens in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of Ukraine), introduced in Poland as early as March 2022, not only secures Ukrainian citizens' access to the labour market, financial support and social services but also provides a measure for assessing the scale and structure of this phenomenon (as displaced persons from Ukraine are expected to register with the Polish PESEL system). PESEL data show that the structure of people arriving in Poland from Ukraine since the war differs dramatically

from previous waves dominated by productive age, work-oriented male temporary migrants. Around 40-45% of those registered are children, and there is a high proportion of women of working age (around 75% of adults). For the first time in Poland's modern history, we also face a relatively large influx of older people, representing over 6% of PESEL registrants. These data indicate the extent of the challenges faced by Polish municipalities, but most importantly they point to a significant care burden on the part of displaced Ukrainian women.

Several large-scale surveys, in particular, a series of nationwide [online surveys conducted by the University of Warsaw, Centre of Migration Research](#) (July-September 2002 and in the first quarter of 2013), and the [survey conducted by the National Bank of Poland](#) (April-May 2002 and Nov. 2002) give more insight into the first reception phase. The data show a complex family situation of the displaced Ukrainians: about 60% came to Poland with children and over 80% were forced to leave their families (mostly parents) in Ukraine. This complexity explains, to a certain extent, the uncertainty of their plans and the trajectories of their mobility. Uncertainty about their future affects about 30-35% of the displaced Ukrainians in Poland. Simultaneously, however, the share of those willing to return to Ukraine as soon as possible decreases and the share of those planning a long-term stay in Poland increases significantly. In terms of

human capital, Ukrainian refugees in Poland have a very favourable educational profile: most of the available survey data point to a very high proportion of people with a tertiary education (60-70 %). This does not necessarily correspond with language skills. According to the CMR data¹, about half of the total had no knowledge of the language (Polish) and only 5% reported good knowledge of Polish. Additionally, there was an overrepresentation of people with poor knowledge of Polish in regions with limited pre-war migration experiences.

Regarding the labour market, early indicators (e.g. [the 2022 NBP survey](#)) showed a relatively high level of economic activity and the key role of language skills in determining success. The same survey showed a clear positive trend in terms of labour market inclusion, with the share of employed people rising from 28% in May to 65% in November 2022. Similar data can be derived from the CMR survey (Górny et al., 2023), which additionally shows that already in the first phase of the reception process, it was observed that war refugees were more likely than migrants to work in occupations related to highly skilled jobs, but also in simple jobs (the lowest segment of the labour market). The most recent wave of the study proves that the overall position of war refugees in the labour market is good, or perhaps even exceptionally good. As many as 88% of all refugees surveyed were economically active, and the majority

were employees (over 70% of the total). To some degree, this is due to well-functioning migration networks that act as particular labour market intermediaries and the very favourable situation in the Polish labour market. First and foremost, however, it is evidence of how active and labour market-oriented the war refugees from Ukraine are.

The same studies which illustrate the rapid integration of displaced Ukrainians into the labour market also highlight one of the main challenges. Even though Ukrainian war refugees are highly educated, with about 75% having completed higher education (and this is a much better rate than for both the Ukrainian and Polish populations), this human capital potential is not easily transferred to the Polish labour market. Ukrainian workers suffer from a significant skills mismatch: over 40% of those who were working immediately before the outbreak of the war and then started a new job in Poland reported that they were overqualified and often could get only inferior jobs.

Despite a truly massive influx and a completely new structure of those arriving (compared to previous waves), the process of early reception of Ukrainian war refugees can be described as relatively successful. This is particularly true for the labour market: available data show a spectacular process of labour market incorporation, with most of the Ukrainian refugees working in Poland soon after arrival.

¹Górny A., et al. 2023. Competencies and Professional Aspirations of Ukrainian Migrants in Poland. Warsaw: Centre of Migration Research [forthcoming].

At the same time, however, the skill-matching process and finding a job corresponding to the competencies and aspirations remains a serious challenge. The current situation may be acceptable in the short term (as a temporary state), but in the long term, it risks a deterioration/loss of skills and may negatively

affect the person's future professional career, even after returning to Ukraine. Recognising this risk was the main motivation for the Skills for the Future programme.

What is the “Skills for the Future” programme?

Magdalena Wnuk and Hanna Smaliichuk

In March 2023, as part of the university program "UW for Ukraine", the CMR UW launched a special support plan "Skills for the Future" for highly qualified people from Ukraine. The plan was designed for people with a background in social, economic or related fields.

We designed the online and offline courses to match three pathways of capacity development: academic, business and NGO. By August, more than 20 courses, ranging from 3-hour lectures to 30-hour training sessions, had been completed, including an on-site summer school in July. Participants of the summer school share their reflections on the event below in this newsletter.

In addition to training, we offer a mentoring program. So far, more than 50 people have actively participated in the program. They have worked with one of our six mentors to improve their professional skills and individual career paths. Both participants

and mentors are supported by a team of three supervisors who speak Ukrainian, English and Polish.

What distinguishes our scheme from the entire "UW for Ukraine" project is its open formula, focused on dialogue with participants. Although we are aware that we cannot provide participants with courses on all the topics they are interested in, we try to collect their suggestions and feedback. Therefore, the basis of the programme is constant communication between supervisors and mentors, who share their insights into real problems and needs of our participants.

Mentoring migrants' integration

Most migrants from Ukraine, after arriving on or after February 24, 2022, were in a vulnerable mental condition and a state of uncertainty. Mentoring, as a support process and an additional tool to facilitate the integration of migrants effectively, helps them to understand in which direction and how to guide their

professional life while in Poland and how to better adjust their skills and competences to the new challenges they may face in Ukraine after the return.

In general, the integration of migrants is a complex, long-term, and multifactorial process that requires economic and psychological resources. Creating the conditions for effective integration is the basis for ensuring that migrants become successful in their personal and professional growth in the country of arrival. Integration is a two-way process requiring the involvement of both the host society and the migrant, which can be achieved more effectively with the support of a mentor.

When a country is faced with a significant wave of migrants (as in the case of Poland in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine), it

needs additional tools for migrant integration. Mentoring, which helps to empower migrants and expand their knowledge of their rights in the process of integration, could be one of them. The mentoring process supports migrants from Ukraine and reduces barriers to their integration.

Refugees (regardless of the reasons for their forced migration) experience stress, anxiety, and confusion immediately upon arrival in a new country. In such circumstances, support in the form of personal mentoring can be beneficial immediately after the arrival, when a new and emotionally challenging period begins for them. The additional support provided by mentors, complementing specific integration services, can be invaluable for individual refugees and help build bridges between host communities and newcomers.

Mentors and mentees about “Skills for the Future”

Hanna Smaliichuk (mentor):

My experience as a mentor of the program participants showed that for such a sensitive category of migrants as war refugees from Ukraine, mentorship is a highly effective tool to facilitate adaptation. These migrants experienced traumatic stress and needed counselling and psychological support after arriving in a new country. Therefore, mentor-mentee meetings can be a "window to their integration" in Poland, helping them

to believe that they will be able to continue their lives in a new, unfamiliar environment.

On the one hand, I believe that the mentoring program is an effective tool for promoting integration and strengthening activism among forced migrants. However, on the other hand, it was psychologically challenging for me as a mentor. After all, meetings with the police often involve harrowing stories of what a person left behind in their homeland, what they lost, and reflections on things and people they will never return to. Also, many of the participants had businesses in Ukraine, held top

positions in international companies and had dream jobs, but because of the migration, they had to start from scratch in Poland. Therefore, such communication always requires me to have psychological stability, the ability to pull a person out of their reflections on past and lost achievements and instead guide them to development and new successes.

Therefore, my experience working with mentees has shown that such a program is not just an integration tool but a living integration support for people trying to find themselves in a new culture, rules and conditions.

Participants of the summer school (interviewed by Alina Burliai):

Tamara

I am 37 years old. I am an accountant and an economics teacher. Before the war, I worked with children, teaching them logic. I was preparing my own studio for the project - a space for children. Now I live in Warsaw and study languages (Polish, German and improving my English). I also received a Project Manager certificate from Coursera and plan to get a Scrum Master. Now I want to test myself in the role of a manager. I am looking for a job.

I found out about the summer school through the University of Warsaw's email newsletter and was immediately interested in the project. It is a mixture of knowledge, new acquaintances, interesting people, tolerance and respect. I was amazed at how interesting, human and profound a series of seminars, lectures and discussions could be. It was exactly what I needed. I got a lot of tips, answers and,

most importantly, motivation. I was most impressed by the level of support, qualification and openness of the lecturers and organizers. Everything was done with kindness and understanding.

The summer school gave me the opportunity to reflect on many issues. It reminded me of the importance of learning and not being afraid of new challenges, in order to use all the opportunities we have now. Thanks to it, I took part in social research. I have made many new friends during this project. They are incredible women, like-minded people whose lives have been changed by the war, but who all continue to study, work, generate ideas and raise children. They motivate and support me.

Olga

I am from Kyiv. We arrived in Poland on March 2, 2022, and now we live as a family (dad, mum and 2 children aged 3 and 11) with a Polish lady in a small village Jedlnia, 100 km from Warsaw. I have a degree in international economics. In Ukraine, I worked as a specialist in international organizations and companies and as an English teacher for school children. I am not working in Poland yet, but during the school year, I helped Ukrainian children with their English.

I found out about the summer school through a newsletter because I was already registered for language courses, and at the very beginning, I learned about the University of Warsaw for Ukraine project from Facebook advertising.

My impressions are the best, I personally needed this week for various reasons. The most important thing is probably the psychological

relief and the feeling of participating in a training that is fully organized for you, that all aspects were taken care of, and the second, no less important thing, are interesting topics that are very useful for me personally now. Last but not least - networking, meeting other Ukrainian women with whom we have something in common.

The most interesting for me were the lectures in English, especially on the topic of interviewing in English, but also very useful were the ones on legalization, nostrification of diplomas, and options for assistance from public organizations. It is unlikely that a more interesting and useful program could have been made in one week.

What skills are needed in humanitarian work?

Agnieszka Kosowicz

The experience of working in unexpected, rapidly changing conditions – which is what the

last year and a half of humanitarian work in Poland has been like – has prompted me to think about what is really needed in working life. Perhaps it could give us a clue as to what skills will be crucial for people in the future. If so – it will be the ability to make decisions quickly and take responsibility for them; imagination and courage – because decisions will have to be made in new, unfamiliar conditions; the willingness to revise one's beliefs and to learn – because we will be confronted with the unknown and will need to learn the new and how to operate it quickly; we will need the ability to communicate – especially with those with whom we disagree; in the world of the future, we will need empathy and intuition, the ability to build trust and relationships – these will be crucial, and machines will not replace people in this; finally – people who give hope and light to others will be indispensable - in the changes to come, we will need people who are kind, open and just plain good.

What support for Ukrainian entrepreneurs is offered in Poland?

Andrzej Drozd, Tetiana Gomon, Polish-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce

On July 20, 2023, the University of Warsaw project "Skills for the Future. UW for Ukraine" held an open panel discussion "What support

can Ukrainian entrepreneurs count on in Poland?" with the participation of Andrzej Drozd - a Vice President of the Polish-Ukrainian

Chamber of Commerce and Tetiana Gomon – a Coordinator of the PUIG's social campaign "Partnership and Employment".

The panel presented the activities of the Polish-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce, which has been working to develop business cooperation between Poland and Ukraine since 1992.

After February 24, the number of sole proprietorships established by Ukrainians in Poland is growing exponentially: by the end of June 2023, 29.4 thousand entities were registered. Despite simplifications constantly being introduced to make it easier for Ukrainians to set up businesses in Poland and transfer them from Ukraine, the process is still quite complicated. 40% say that lack of experience in the Polish market is the main obstacle to business development.

In response to the need for dialogue between the Ukrainian business and the entrepreneurship support community, PUIG initiated a series of conferences "City - Space for Business. Ukrainian Entrepreneurship in Poland," showing the tools of support – governmental, local governmental and non-governmental – that Ukrainian entrepreneurs can count on.

Another activity of the Chamber is its participation in the "Way to Business" project implemented by the Microfinance Centre to support Ukrainian refugee women in achieving financial independence and socio-economic integration through entrepreneurship. As a

partner in the project, PUIG advises Ukrainian women on how to start and run their own businesses in Poland.

In addition to practical activities, the Chamber closely follows the legislative process of the so-called Ukrainian Specustawa (special law) introduced in March 2022, which regulates the stay and work of war refugees in Poland. We are constantly responding to the changing needs and expectations of migrants, submitting our recommendations and a number of initiatives to the legislature. Currently, the Polish-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce, together with the Civic Development Forum, is working on a draft roadmap for migration policy, including the identification of barriers to foreigners doing business in Poland and recommendations for their removal.

We recommend everyone interested in doing business in Poland to read the guide "Ecosystem supporting entrepreneurship and start-ups in Poland: a set of opportunities" by Liudmyly Huliaieva and Wojciech Duranowski, available at www.partnerstwo.info.

On behalf of the Polish-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce, we thank the Organizers for the invitation, and the Participants for the inspiring discussion, interesting questions and exchange of valuable experiences.

"Skills for the Future" at IMISCOE

Marta Jaroszewicz

"Skills for the Future" also took part in the side event organised during the 20th IMISCOE Annual Conference (the biggest European conference on migration) this year held in Warsaw. The side event called "Ukrainian Women's Voices" presented the perspective of migrant women, and the challenges they face when trying to enter the EU labour markets related to both gender and ethnic-related stereotypes. By giving a voice to migrant women and experts working in the field, we wanted to highlight several issues. First, migrants usually incur higher costs of entry into the labour market due to different barriers: structural, legal, cultural and others. In particular, migrants may experience deskilling, especially in the case of forced migration, where migration decisions do not result from long-term planning and preparations. When it comes to female migration, those costs are

even higher, as women usually need to accommodate both family care and work obligations. Second, there is much evidence that migrants enter the labour market via social networks that usually comprise other migrants. In those circumstances, migrants are often inclined to obtain jobs in migrant niches that are subject to strict gender selection, which may relegate them to a limited number of jobs, often in the feminised sector of domestic work. A specific trait of the domestic work sector is its informality, intransparent payment rules which may create room for the discrimination. Yet as our panel clearly show migrants struggle to get a decent position in the labour market and use their skills in the most efficient way. During the event, Hanna Smaliichuk (mentor) and Vita Korin (participant) of the „UW for Ukraine" programme discussed the obstacles Ukrainian women may face when entering the Polish labour market and how they can be mitigated.

**Paweł Kaczmarczyk**

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Magdalena Wnuk

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Hanna Smaliichuk

PhD in economics, Associate Professor of the Department of Socioeconomics and Human Resources Management at the Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetman (Ukraine) and at CMR.

**Alina Burliai**

PhD in Economics and Management of the National Economy Assistant Professor at CMR. Her research interests include various aspects of sustainable development of society, including the study of problems related to migration processes arising from the war in Ukraine.

**Agnieszka Kosowicz**

President of the Board and founder of the Polish Migration Forum Foundation. She has been working on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers since 2000.

Tetiana Gomon

Co-author and leader of the Social Campaign "Partnership and Employment" of the Polish-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce. Editor of the Polish-Ukrainian economic portal eDIALOG.media.

**Andrzej Drozd**

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Marta Jaroszewicz

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